

Tempted

Mark 1:9-15

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. (Mark 1:12-13)

All three Synoptic Gospels describe Jesus's temptation in the desert. Unlike Matthew and Luke, however, Mark gives us the short version of the story. He doesn't tell us how Satan tests Jesus, or how Jesus responds to the testing. But there are powerful details in Mark's version, details that can help us navigate our own experiences of brokenness and healing.

What I notice first in Mark's version is the oddness of the scene at a big-picture level. Consider who and what populates the wilderness that Mark describes. We have the Holy Spirit. We have Jesus. We have Satan. We have wild beasts. And we have angels. All together in one place at one time, co-existing.

I start with this image because it offers a necessary corrective to our visions of the Christian life. I tend to divide my spiritual landscape into neat, inviolable sections. Shadow and light. Secular and religious. Profane and holy. I assume that if I'm in a healthy spiritual place, evil will stay far away. I imagine that angels don't share space with wild predators. I believe that God's Spirit never leads us into wastelands.

But no. Spirit, Jesus, Satan, beasts, angels, and wilderness. *Together.* Not for an hour, an afternoon, or a day, but forty days. Which is the Bible's handy way of saying, "A very, very, *very* long time."

It's worth holding onto this image of Mark's crowded desert because the austere and complicated landscape he describes, the bizarre menagerie of despair and solace, isolation and accompaniment, is where we live. This is the realm where God's work of holy repair begins.

Three details stand out to me in this text. First, Jesus doesn't choose the wilderness. Mark tells us that the Spirit of God drives him there. The verb in the Greek is *ekballei*—literally, "to throw out." As in, the Spirit

throws or casts or hurls Jesus out into the desert. It's the same verb Mark later uses to describe the casting out of demons and the flinging of corrupt moneychangers out of the temple.

In other words, what we have here is not a first-century version of Jesus giving up chocolate as a spiritual discipline or making a retreat of silence at a beautiful monastery. What we have is the Spirit of God grabbing Jesus by the scruff of the neck and throwing him headlong into a place he doesn't want to go. A place of isolation, deprivation, danger, and testing.

To be clear, this is not how I first heard the story, growing up. I learned about Jesus's temptation in Sunday School. I still remember my teacher, a grandmotherly woman in a hairnet and beige panty hose, stretching the Judean wilderness across a flannelgraph board in front of my first-grade class. At the far left of the fuzzy felt landscape, an innocuous-looking devil—scrawny, fork-tailed, and ridiculous—stooped in the sand and reached for a loaf-shaped stone. To his right, a supremely undisturbed Jesus towered over the landscape in a pristine white robe, his finger pointed devastatingly at his tempter.

Looking back now, I give my teacher credit for doing the best she could with a bunch of wiggly six-year-olds. But I regret the version of Jesus that I carried away from those Sunday school lessons, because it was a version that did me harm. The Jesus I absorbed as a young person was a muscular superhero who wielded perfect control over his environment and his choices. His temptation wasn't real, because *he* wasn't real. His experience in the desert had no sting, no suspense, no edge. Jesus was pretending, putting on a performance of temptation to set me an example. In this performance, Satan was an inept clown, doomed to fail, and Jesus's triumph over him was so painless and predictable, it cost the Son of God nothing.

At no point in my childhood or young adulthood did I hear that Jesus actually *struggled* in the wilderness. That he feared and resisted the movement of the Spirit in his life. That he craved what the evil one offered. That he hurt, wept, wrestled, and suffered.

The corollary to this belief in a divine superhero was a terrible misunderstanding about the wilderness itself. If I found myself stuck in a desolate spiritual place for any length of time, I assumed it was my fault. After all, Jesus averted his temptations without breaking a sweat, so what was wrong with me? Surely, I was failing as a Christian. Harboring some secret sin, or giving way to doubt, or praying too sporadically. It couldn't be the case that God *wanted* me to be out there in the desert, wandering and lost. Could it?

In Mark's story, the Spirit of God *drives* Jesus into the wilderness. The same gentle Spirit who descends on him as a dove, the same delighted God who tears the heavens open to assure Jesus that he is precious—that same

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God hurls Jesus into what feels like oblivion. Not because Jesus is sinful or faithless, but because he is dearly loved.

I want to pause here and make sure I'm being clear. I am *not* saying that God wills terrible things to happen to us, or that suffering in and of itself is life-giving. The church has historically done great harm in ennobling pain, and it's important that we name and repent of that lie. There are many forms of suffering in this world that should only ever be addressed, healed, resisted, or rejected outright. The suffering that results from abuse, trauma, racial and economic injustice, misogyny, homophobia, mental or physical illness—we are *not* called to passively accept these forms of suffering as God's will.

Rather, what I'm saying is that sometimes, even in the midst of circumstances that don't originate with God, the Spirit chooses the wilderness for us so that God can deepen and purify our comprehension of our belovedness. At his baptism, Jesus hears the absolute truth about who he is. He experiences God's love and pleasure so intensely, the skies split open. That's the easy part. The much harder part comes in the desert, when he has to face down every vicious assault on his identity as God's treasured child.

As the divine voice from heaven fades, as the cunning words of the tempter grow louder in his ears, as the isolation of the wilderness plays tricks on his heart and mind, Jesus has to learn a kind of love that is independent of external circumstances. He knows what God's love feels like in the baptismal font, in the gathered community, in the sacred realm of bells and smells. Now he has to learn the shape and color of God's love in the barren places. In the emptiness. In the lonely shadows.

Parker Palmer, a Quaker theologian and writer, talks about this process as a "pressing down onto ground on which it is safe to stand."¹ In a 2021 interview he gave about his experience with clinical depression, Palmer says that for many years, he lived his spiritual life at "great elevation." He visualized faith as an "up, up, and away" mountain climb, in which he'd attain greater and greater heights until finally, he would touch the hand of God.

What he learned in the throes of depression is that deep spiritual growth actually happens in the opposite direction. The danger of living at high elevation, he says, is that every time you fall, you have to fall a long distance, a distance that will make impact brutal. Every landing, if it doesn't kill you outright, will shatter bones. But if you allow the Spirit of God to press you down onto ground on which it is safe to stand, then you can fall all day long, and that secure, steady ground beneath your body—the ground of God's own being—will hold you.

1. Palmer, "The Soul in Depression."

Jesus doesn't choose the wilderness, but he consents to stay there. He consents to learn what only the desert—not his family, not the temple, not his traditions, not even the Scriptures themselves—can teach.

If you are in a wilderness you haven't chosen, consider the possibility that you are on holy ground. Consider that the Spirit who has driven you there knows what she's doing. Consider that it's divine mercy, not divine condemnation, that brings you down from the heights and teaches you to cherish the low ground. Because the unnerving truth is this: we can be loved and uncomfortable at the same time. We can be loved and bereft at the same time. In the wilderness, the love that survives is hardcore. It is flinty, not soft. Salvific, not sentimental. We don't learn to trust it quickly. It takes forty days. Forty years. *Lifetimes*.

The second detail I want to highlight is this one: Jesus stays with the wild beasts. That's all Mark gives us, just this one intriguing line: "He was with the wild beasts." The noun in the Greek emphasizes that these animals are dangerous. Not cuddly mice and timid deer, but vipers, scorpions, jackals. Possibly even Asian lions, wild boars, and bears.

Mark doesn't tell us that Jesus traps, fights, or kills these animals. He doesn't tell us that Jesus tames them. He just says that Jesus is "with" them.

I love this image of Jesus keeping company with the wild beasts, because I think it speaks eloquently to an important aspect of holy repair. Sometimes, we use faith, religious doctrine, prayer, or even the church itself to fend off anything in our lives that feels untamed, unsettled, undomesticated, or unpredictable. We assume that Christian maturity is all about borders and boxes, clean lines and carefully delineated belief systems. We fear wild things and we flee from them.

I grew up in a very tight-knit Christian community. I was a preacher's kid, so I probably spent more hours inside of church buildings than I did in my childhood home. I was steeped in Scripture, theology, prayer, and worship from my earliest years, and I was loved well by many good and generous people who practiced their faith as fervently as my family did.

Because my parents were first-generation immigrants from India, our faith community was also inextricably tied to our ethnic and cultural identity; there was no separating of the two. From as early on as I can remember, I was taught that our way of being Christian was the only true way, the only way that honors God.

I know that some people who grow up in immersive, cloistered faith environments resent it, but that was not the case for me. I *loved* it. I loved all of it. The music, the worship, the teaching, the community. Most of all, I loved the security of my own belonging, my crystal-clear sense that I knew exactly where the boundaries were between right and wrong, Christian and

non-Christian, us and them. As long as I stayed within the bounds of my sanctified community, I would know who to be and how to be. My spiritual life was a walled-off garden, and I had no desire to leave it.

And then? Then the wild beasts showed up.

For me, they showed up in the form of questions I wasn't supposed to ask: Why can't women preach or lead worship? What's so threatening about evolution, psychology, social justice, and feminism? Why is it wrong to be gay? How is it that we keep reading the Bible literally when the book begs for a more varied approach? Why do we make heroes of men who lust after power? Why are stories of abuse and neglect in our midst swept under the rug? Why do we consider depression and anxiety spiritual failures? Where is God's grace in our honor-shame culture? Why does God have to be male?

The questions didn't emerge all at once. They came slowly as my world expanded and I met faithful people whose Christianity looked different than mine. Over time, I began to sense a growing impatience, restlessness, *wildness* within my own heart.

Needless to say, my questions were met in all the predictable ways: "You're losing your faith. You're reading dangerous books. You're becoming undisciplined. You're idolizing your intellect. You're breaking God's heart."

Wanting to be loved and accepted, I ignored the questions, and spent many more years pretending to be fine. Pretending that if I just tried harder, my doubts would disappear. Pretending that I was perfectly content in my manicured garden.

The wild beasts didn't disappear. They stalked and bellowed and roared and clawed. They demanded my attention until I had to make a choice. Either I would leave the version of faith I loved, or my soul would wither.

There was *no joy* in leaving. No relief, no freedom, no consolation. All of those beautiful things came later. What came first was death. Death, sorrow, guilt, and raw fear. Because it wasn't just that I didn't know how to be a Christian anymore. It was that I didn't know how to be a *person* anymore. What would my identity be? Who would love me? How would I find a path in the midst of so much confusion and loss?

Somehow, even in the midst of that terrible grief, I had a dim sense that choosing wildness—choosing a way of faith that honored the questions, respected the mysteries, and left space for the unconventional and the undomesticated—was the right choice. It felt lonely. It felt precarious. It felt sad beyond language. But it also felt like God.

In Mark's story, Jesus consents to stay with the wild beasts. He learns how to be with them, and he learns how to let them be. During those forty days in the desert, he grows within himself the capacity to sit with all that is rough and unpolished. He learns how to respond to wildness with

serenity, patience, and gentleness, not rushing to tame or tamp down, but to let the feral flourish.

We know that this is true both literally and metaphorically, because Jesus emerges from the desert to become something of a “wild beast” himself. Until his crucifixion, he spends his days provoking, disrupting, and upending the religious conventions of his time. Not to destroy them, but to repair and reinvigorate them. He refuses to be tamed by the people who insist they have the divine figured out. He refuses to squeeze the God he loves into a box of abstract certainties.

Instead, breaking all taboo, and collapsing all tribalism, he embraces the lepers and befriends the bleeding women and eats with the tax collectors and heals on the Sabbath. Having learned the wild wisdom of the desert, he becomes a “thin space” himself, a sacred place where men and women can encounter the untamable divine for themselves.

It takes an exhausting amount of energy to resist the wildness of God. If your resistance is wearing you out, then consider the possibility that God is inviting you to stay with the wild beasts for a while. Consider that a bigger, wilder, and far more expansive God than you’ve yet known is calling for you, hungering after you, and longing to bless your wildness with God’s own.

The last detail I want to highlight is this one: there are angels in the wilderness. Mark writes that the angels wait on Jesus. Just as a shepherd tends his sheep or a nursing mother tends her infant, these angels keep vigil and sustain Jesus through his forty days of suffering and struggle.

I draw attention to this detail because it’s an easy one to miss when we’re wandering in broken places. In the midst of the wilderness, our eyes are often fixated on our pain, and if we bother to look for angels at all, we look only for them to rescue us.

This is understandable; Jesus himself struggles with a misapprehension regarding angels. In Matthew’s and Luke’s versions of the wilderness story, Satan tempts Jesus to jump from the pinnacle of the temple, promising him that God’s angels will prevent him from getting hurt. The implication is that if God loves us, God’s angels will keep us safe.

It’s such an enticing lie—one that targets our deepest fears about surviving in a chaotic world. But the angels in Mark’s Gospel don’t medi-vac Jesus out of the wilderness. They *tend* to him. They accompany him. They stick with him and help him bear what he must bear.

As I think about the loneliness of the desert, I wonder if the angels who help Jesus arrive in forms very different from what we imagine. *Maybe* they manifest as celestial creatures with powerful wings and blinding faces. But maybe they show up as cool breezes across the sun-scorched hills. As trickles of water for Jesus’s parched throat. As shade on a blazing afternoon.

As the sweetness of bird song. As a brilliant display of wildflowers or the swirl of constellations on a clear, cloudless night.

If the earth and everything in it is God's, then God might very well send us angels in guises we take for granted. Our challenge is to remember that even in the land of shadow and starvation, even in the places where the wild beasts roam, God's agents of love and care abide. We might not recognize them as angelic until years later. But they abide.

In my own life, God's angels have come in a thousand different guises, and I'm still learning how to recognize them. They've come in the form of wise friends, mentors, priests, and teachers. They've offered themselves up in the beautiful language of poetry, liturgy, song, and story. They've welcomed me as a fellow parishioner in the church I now consider my spiritual home. They've called to me in the old redwood trees, the pounding surf, and the winding hiking trails I have the privilege to enjoy here in northern California.

Sometimes, they've arrived as strangers who show up for a moment and speak the words I most need to hear exactly when I most need to hear them. I want to share the story of one such angel, because I think her message speaks to the heart of what grace in the wilderness looks like.

Several years ago, when my daughter was in middle school, she went through a period of intense struggle and developed anorexia. My husband and I feared for her life, and during the worst of her illness, we hospitalized her for her own safety.

I don't know quite how to describe the abyss we fell into after we made that decision. It was an abyss of terror and anguish and anger and failure. For my part, I was filled with shame, because I felt as though I'd failed at job no. 1 of motherhood, the job of keeping my child well-fed and healthy. I was toxically angry at the culture we live in for its sick obsession with thinness. What I felt towards God was a poisonous combination of rage, bewilderment, and heartbreak, because I was praying nonstop, and as far as I could tell, God was doing *nothing*.

On the morning after the admission, after the doctors explained that we wouldn't be able to see our daughter for several days, I stumbled out of the hospital, got into my car, and started driving without aim or purpose.

I ended up in some part of town I wasn't familiar with, in the parking lot of a Catholic bookshop I'd never seen before. Without knowing what I was doing, or why, I walked in and wandered the aisles until a woman—a Catholic sister who worked at the shop—came up to me. All she said was, "Can I help you find anything?" I burst into tears.

For at least three or four minutes, I cried so hard, I couldn't speak. She took my hands in hers and let me cry. When I could breathe again, she said,

"Wait here." She disappeared for a minute and returned with a small, velvet box. Inside it was a silver crucifix on a chain, Jesus's broken body clearly outlined against the beams of the tiny cross.

At that point in my life, I was a stranger to crucifixes. The church I attended displayed empty crosses—crosses that celebrate resurrection. But the woman pressed the crucifix into my hands, looked into my eyes, and said, "Keep this. Hang onto it. Only a suffering God can help."

I didn't know at the time that she was quoting Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who penned this line in a Nazi prison not long before his execution. All I knew was that the God I was busy hating was sending me an angel, someone to tend me, someone to bear the unbearable with me, someone to show me precisely where God was in the pain, because I was busy looking in another direction and could not find that God on my own. The holy repair I needed in that moment was a capacity to see God as God really is. Not a wizard God, but a God who accompanies. A God who dwells in mystery, but never abandons me to face the mystery alone.

There are angels in the wilderness. They don't always come with cures. They don't hand us the control we crave. But they come as messengers of un-failing love. They come because the God who knows that we are dust, the God who drove Jesus into the wilderness so that for all of eternity our Messiah would understand human pain from the inside—keeps sending them.

The Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness. He remains with the wild beasts. And the angels wait on him. *All this*, so that when Jesus finally emerges from the desert to proclaim good news, that good news will be unassailable. Rock solid. Tested in the barren places, brought to its knees, and proven true.

This, of course, is precisely the kind of good news the world needs so desperately right now. Good news that is credible, authentic, and resilient enough to survive the ravages of the desert. God mends our broken places not simply for our own benefit, but so that our stories of mending can bless, inspire, heal, and challenge the world.

As we encounter the wilderness in our own lives, may we experience the companionship of the Christ who knows the barren places better than we do. May our long stints amidst the wild beasts teach us who we really are—the precious, beautiful, and wholly liberated children of God. And when the angels in all their sweet and secret guises whisper the good news into our ears, may we listen and believe them.